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Author(s): Linda Robinson

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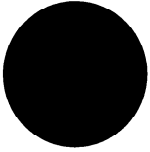


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REPORTAGE

Linda Robinson is the Latin America bureau chief for U.S. News & World Report. She received the 1999 Maria Moors Cabot Prize for reporting on Latin America.



Where Angels Fear to Tread Colombia and Latin America's Tier of Turmoil

Linda Robinson

Americans have now been told that the South American nation of Colombia is in crisis, but the ingredients of the crisis, and what the United States proposes to do about it, remain largely a mystery. As often happens in policymaking, the cart has gotten ahead of the horse: the Clinton administration has already begun an ambitious push to train and equip the Colombian military, ostensibly to fight an exploding cocaine industry but not the guerrillas who control most of the territory where it is produced.

Last fall the Senate Narcotics Caucus convened hearings to find out just how this feat and others were going to be accomplished by the new multi-billion-dollar aid proposals floating around Washington. They tried to parse quixotic statements, like this one by the State Department's top anti-narcotics official Rand Beers: "We have no intention of becoming involved in Colombia's counterinsurgency, but we do recognize that given the extensive links between Colombia's guerrilla groups and the narcotics trade counternarcotics forces will come into contact with the guerrillas...." Throwing up his hands, chairman Sen. Charles Grassley complained, "We are left with the appearance of a policy of drift and dissembling."

The exchange prompted a sense of déjà vu among veterans of the contentious debates over Nicaragua in the 1980s, who remembered that the original rationale offered for the arming of Nicaraguan rebels was to interdict arms flowing to the Salvadoran insurgency; later, when it became clear that the rebels were engaged in no such activity,

the Reagan administration admitted that the actual goal was to overthrow the communist regime in Nicaragua.

Current officials are burdened with this legacy of distrust bequeathed by their predecessors, but the problem with current policy may be less a lack of candor than genuine self-delusion. There is little appetite in Washington today for counterinsurgency wars; officials fervently wish that the reality in Colombia were other than it is, that they could draw a neat line between counternarcotics and counterinsurgency.

But soldiers on the front lines have no such illusions. A brigade of Colombian marines that has been trained by U.S. Marines out of Camp LeJeune knows that southern Colombia is the turf of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). "It is only a matter of time until we engage them," Major Carlos Humberto Serna said, referring to the FARC, a 15,000-strong guerrilla army, as he led a platoon deep into the jungle of southwestern Putumayo province to blow up three cocaine labs run by poor Colombian peasants. Serna and his men also know that they are seriously outgunned and outmanned. As they tramp through the dense undergrowth of this no-man's-land with the safety catches off their M-16s, they hope that if they encounter rebels it will only be one of the small finance units that go around collecting "taxes" from coca growers and lab workers, rather than the combat troops that travel in groups of 100 or more. Their Motorola UHF radios can't communicate with the other two platoons spread out in the hilly terrain, let alone call

out for air support from the base in the next province.

Putumayo is about to become a much more familiar word to Americans. It has been declared the priority target zone because its once-pristine rain forest is the epicenter of new coca cultivation, which has increased by 330 percent here in the past two years. In January, the marines will be joined by the first army counternarcotics battalion trained by U.S. Special Forces and supplied with 12 Vietnam-era helicopters. But even this help is a drop in the bucket. Putumayo has more than 5,000 kilometers of rivers and only a few lonely military outposts.

What most Americans don't realize is that Colombia has never really governed this province or, indeed, the entire southern half of its territory. A string of provincial cities runs diagonally across the country; to the south there are no highways, a scattering of air strips, and nothing but jungle and plains. This half of Colombia is being colonized by guerrillas and the drug business, so the government's task is not merely to retake the area but to establish an effective presence here for the first time.

Implacable Foes

For the past decade, U.S. policy toward Colombia has focused exclusively on the drug trade, and only now are officials recognizing that it is inextricably bound up with the country's other, equally severe, problems. From Colombia's point of view, drugs are less important than the increasingly aggressive insurgency, which is in turn rooted in a much older plague of political violence that has marked its entire history. Yet the U.S. approach to this wider problem is backward; it envisions weakening the guerrillas by reducing their drug profits, attacking the means rather than the causes of the violence that long predated Colombia's emergence as the source of 80 percent of the world's cocaine. Another folly is to imagine that this approach will be as antiseptic as freezing a drug dealer's bank account, rather than

fighting in hostile and impenetrable terrain against well-armed, implacable foes who know every valley and stream.

Colombia's maelstrom of violence is enough to make any rational person adopt a *sauve qui peut* attitude. The FARC and the 5,000-man National Liberation Army, a rebel group that operates in the north, began their war 35 years ago and now control about 40 percent of the countryside; before that, the 1947–58 civil war known as *La Violencia* took 200,000 lives and was itself preceded by five other civil wars between the two political parties that have dominated the country's history.

The pathology of violence that has gripped Colombia, and grown worse this decade, extends beyond the political sphere: the country has the world's highest murder rate and is the scene of half the world's kidnappings. Since 1986, when 182 people were kidnapped, the rate has climbed to well over 2,000 a year. Massacres, carried out primarily by virulent right-wing paramilitary groups, have increased 44 percent this year over last; as of July, 847 civilians had been killed as a result. And yet a mentality of "kill or be killed" has taken hold to such a degree that 60 percent of Colombians polled say they do not want the paramilitary groups to be disbanded. A majority also say they want U.S. troops to come and solve their problems, since their own government has proven unable to protect them.

The United States could turn its back on Colombia, though it has wedded itself closely to the drug issue. Ironically, cocaine consumption at home continues to decline, although Colombia's coca cultivation has exploded, doubling since 1995, and much of the heroin now being seized in the United States comes from Colombia as well. Drugs remain the salient issue driving U.S. policy, but what Colombia is actually facing is a security crisis brought about by the guerrillas' gains, a tottering economy, and weak institutions (only 3 percent of crimes are prosecuted).

It might be tempting to write off the country but for an ominous synergy that is developing in the region. Colombia's unrest is spreading to neighboring countries, which are grappling with their own serious crises. The northern zone of South America is starting to look like a tier of turmoil that could rival the Central American mess of the 1980s, and one in which much more significant U.S. interests are at stake—not just drugs but trade, investment, oil, and the Panama Canal. The much-vaunted hemispheric community of democracies may well begin to unravel here, to be replaced in a few short years by failed states where anarchy or rogue groups rule.

Safe Havens

Colombian guerrillas and drug traffickers regularly use the neighboring territories of Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama for safe haven, resupply and gun running, and those countries' nationals have been killed and kidnapped in the cross fire while their governments have mainly looked the other way. Colombian-Venezuelan relations, never easy, have become increasingly tense since Venezuela's populist president, Hugo Chávez, took office in February. He has charged Colombia with failing to secure the border area, where both countries' principal oil fields are located, while at the same time making repeated sympathetic overtures to the FARC guerrillas. Suspensions of Chávez's intentions are due in part to his own history as a paratrooper who led an unsuccessful coup in 1992 and then rode a wave of popularity into the presidency on a pledge to conduct a peaceful revolution at home.

But nervousness about Chávez is also born of the region's common history: all four of these countries were liberated from Spanish colonial rule by Simón Bolívar, who was born in what is now Venezuela. Bolívar formed a federation, Gran Colombia, which he ruled from Colombia until disgruntled Venezuelans broke up the union. Ever since, Venezuelans have resented what they see as

Colombians' superior attitude, and now Chávez has come along aspiring to be a new Bolívar for the entire region. Both he and the FARC espouse a Bolivarian ideology that is a vague stew of left-leaning, nationalist, authoritarian, justice-for-the-poor ideas, which has fueled fears that the two may have a common agenda.

While he is making waves abroad, Chávez also faces an extremely delicate situation at home. A charismatic, even messianic leader, his goal of remaking Venezuela has wide popular support, but his commitment to democracy remains in question after repeated clashes with the legislature and the courts. The constitution has been rewritten by an elected assembly of Chávez backers, and new elections early next year may cement his control over the levers of government. How he will use his power remains to be seen; the only thing that seems certain is that the political parties that governed the country for 40 years have been fatally discredited by a corrupt spoils system that ranks as one of the world's worst, fed by the largest oil reserves outside the Middle East.

Nicknamed Saudi Venezuela, the country should have been able to provide a middle-class life for its 23 million people, but instead 80 percent of them are living in poverty. As Chávez is quick to point out, his election was the response to the system's failure, not the cause of it. But whether he and his team have the ability to build functioning institutions is unclear, and the months ahead are likely to be tumultuous. If he acts on his pledges to put corrupt judges and former presidents on trial and attacks still-powerful entrenched interests, he may find a coup being fomented against him and resort to his former insurrectionary impulses.

Even if he avoids that political showdown, he faces a Hobson's choice in confronting Latin America's most troubled economy, which contracted by 10 percent in the first half of 1999 and is staggering under high inflation, an overvalued currency, a bloated bureaucracy, and a \$65 billion

foreign debt. If he does not administer tough reforms of the sort that the rest of the region has undergone, the economy will not recover. But the harsh medicine may cause his immense popularity to evaporate and prompt another chain of destabilizing reactions. So far, the United States has been hoping that he will pursue a moderate course, but it will not remain indifferent to turmoil in Venezuela since the country is the principal source of U.S. oil imports. Until now at least, it has also been considered a secure source, far from the conflicts of the Middle East.

After Venezuela, Ecuador has the worst economic record in Latin America; like Venezuela, it has high inflation and unemployment rates, and a large foreign debt, is dependent on oil revenues, and is unable to carry out unpopular economic reforms. In September, Ecuador's government defaulted on its supposedly undefaultable Brady bond debt in an effort to force foreign creditors to agree to easier terms. The standoff has cast a pall over the whole region because investors fear other countries will follow suit, but the most immediate effect has been to dry up credit for Ecuador and undermine its ability to pay other obligations. The economic standoff may well result in the fall of the government if it cannot persuade the reluctant opposition-dominated Congress to support fiscal reforms. Two failed governments preceded the current one, which is led by Jamil Mahaud.

The country has been caught for years in a cycle of economic-induced crises, strikes, and unrest, the root of which is the historical rivalry between its Guayaquil-based liberals and Quito-based conservatives. Nonetheless, its troubles would rumble along without major consequences were it not for the present confluence of crises in the region. Ecuador is not a central factor in the budding turmoil, but it is another weak link in the chain; it cannot provide a bulwark of stability or deny Colombian rebels a rearguard sanctuary. As Putumayo province, just across its border, becomes a focal point

of the conflict, Ecuador is likely to be drawn in more deeply, as the kidnapping of a dozen foreigners in its territory in September, possibly by FARC rebels, suggested.

Panama's Colombian Factor

Panama's problems would certainly be manageable were it not for the Colombian factor. When the Panama Canal Treaties were signed in 1977, the main security threat to the canal was considered to be disgruntled Panamanians; so, the logic went, giving them a stake in the canal would be its best protection. But Panama, long a way station for drug trafficking, now faces a growing conflict in its Darién province, which borders Colombia. FARC rebels have a near-constant presence there, as they have had for years, but the top paramilitary chieftain recently declared Panama's police force a military target for allegedly protecting the rebels. The two Colombian factions are engaged in a heated battle for the control of the border region since it is the primary corridor for guns and drugs. The FARC also uses Panamanian ports for resupply, and drug trafficking in Panama is on the rise again.

These mounting problems come at an unpropitious time for Panama, which is about to go it alone for the first time in its history. U.S. troops have been stationed in Panama since 1903, when the United States wrested the isthmian territory from Colombia to build the canal. The troops' departure, in compliance with the treaties that turn the waterway over to Panama on December 31, marks Panama's psychological independence, the end of its status as a virtual U.S. protectorate. Although the transition has been underway for two decades, the country is now (with the gradual drawdown of U.S. forces) entering uncharted territory in which the Americans will not be waiting in the wings should a crisis erupt. Three-quarters of Panamanians have long said they would like U.S. troops to stay, but nationalist factions will make reversing course highly unlikely.

Absent outside trouble, Panama's necessary education in self-reliance would likely proceed without incident. But should Colombia's war begin seriously to threaten the isthmus, Panama's ability to safeguard the canal and defend its territory will be extremely limited, since its military was constitutionally disbanded after the 1989 U.S. invasion to oust dictator Manuel Noriega. The Panamanian Public Force consists of 11,000 lightly armed policemen with no heavy equipment and a handful of small boats. Given the political difficulties of re-introducing U.S. troops, Panama has little deterrent leverage and is vulnerable to Colombia's escalating conflict.

Colombia's Weakened Military

Since it is Colombia's violence that exacerbates these countries' individual problems, it is logical for them to demand that Colombia grapple with its deteriorating situation. But Colombia's military is woefully ill-equipped to confront the guerrilla challenge. Its 2:1 ratio of combat troops to guerrillas is a far cry from the 10:1 classic counterinsurgency formula. High school graduates are exempt from active duty by law, and most other troops are pinned down defending fixed installations like oil pipelines, which the rebels blow up 50 to 100 times each year. The country, three and a half times the size of Vietnam, is split into thirds by steep Andean ranges, yet the military has only 90 helicopters, not counting those the United States has given the drug-fighting police force. Intelligence is so bad that troops are often dropped into nests of guerrillas and slaughtered or captured.

Leadership in the field is poor. When four American bird-watching tourists were kidnapped by the FARC last year, the colonel in charge of a rescue operation stayed at the base while sending in one of the mobile counterinsurgency brigades. The soldiers' youthful faces gleamed with sweat as the helicopters veered down, guns firing to clear the landing zone; their fear was contagious.

My confidence had already been shaken the day before while out with the commander of the armed forces on a "hearts-and-minds mission" along the northern banana coast. After the civic action speeches, free hair cuts and dental service (and, astonishingly, a tent offering guns for sale), we returned to the general's helicopter, which was guarded by three soldiers dozing in the shade of a tree. Once aboard, the general casually remarked that he had nearly been killed in this same spot the year before when his car was dynamited by rebels on the way to the airport. The car was armored so the general was not harmed, but it limped to his plane on its wheel rims.

The Colombian military's weakness is connected to another grave problem: the 5,000 or so paramilitary forces that are variously backed by landowners, drug traffickers, and elements of the army. They are responsible for three-quarters of the human rights abuses, compared to the military's 3 percent, but this in part reflects the army's defensive posture and the fact that the paramilitaries are doing most of the fighting. Their targets are mostly civilians they accuse of supporting the rebels, however, rather than the rebels themselves, and their rampages have displaced over a million people. The usual *modus operandi* is for the paramilitary bands to come into a zone while the army turns a blind eye. It sometimes offers logistical support, and in one incident last summer the army actively came to their aid when rebels surrounded the base of the top paramilitary chieftain, Carlos Castaño. Disputing the army's claim that no close links exist, the FARC has published lists of the locations of the paramilitaries' bases, the radio frequencies on which they communicate with the military, and the names of officers who serve as liaisons.

To its credit, the government has cashiered four generals, putting one of them on trial, and disbanded the intelligence brigade for its ties to the right-wing bands. Some top officers realize that the paramili-

taries are a symptom of the army's weakness and are themselves engaged in drug trafficking, but they remain the virtual power in the northern provinces, much as the guerrillas are in the south. In the past year, moreover, the paramilitaries have begun to move into the south. In Putumayo, after the guerrillas kidnapped a mayor and took him into Ecuador, and then forced most of the town council to resign, masked men came in with lists of suspected rebel sympathizers and shot them in the middle of the street. Visiting the army garrison hunkered down on the town's outskirts, I asked the commander about the recent killings. "There are no paramilitaries here," he replied, even though eyewitnesses had described the killings in detail and said the men were still lodged in a local hotel.

The army made a better showing last July when the FARC launched its biggest offensive to date: two dozen attacks across ten provinces. Even the president's plane was pressed into service to ferry troops to the battle zones. But in one case they arrived after a FARC elite mobile battalion had held a town for three days and was preparing to withdraw under cover of night behind a shield of civilians who had been held up at a roadblock erected for that purpose. As I watched the FARC commander radio his various units into defensive positions and send a food detail trundling lunch in giant pails down the mountain to their comrades, air force planes came over the mountains to drop their bombs in a driving rain. But when I descended to the valley later that day, the only casualties to be found were 30 head of cattle belonging to a distraught old farmer named Ricardo Yerpas, a scene worthy of the land that gave us Gabriel García Márquez's fiction.

The next day at a military base, corpses said to be rebels were laid out, stripped to their underwear, with camouflage uniforms draped over them, but no one explained why they had been disrobed. Though the guerrillas certainly suffered heavier casualties

than usual in the offensive, the suspect body count and reliance on air attacks reminded me of Vietnam and the adage that kill ratios and air power don't win guerrilla wars.

The Guerrilla Strategy

The army counterattack may have taught the FARC the dangers of operating in large units, a tactic it has increasingly adopted to overwhelm army posts and police stations. This conventional style of combat shows how bold the rebels have become in going head-to-head with the Colombian military. The FARC's seven elite mobile battalions rove over several provinces each, in addition to 61 fronts scattered throughout the country. They are well equipped with automatic rifles and handguns, grenade launchers, radios, and uniforms, and many of them have been fighting for a decade or more. Their ranks have tripled in the past decade, and I asked Raúl Reyes, one of the FARC's top leaders and chief negotiators, whether their aim is still to expand to 30,000 fighters as their military plan calls for. He said they are well on their way to their goal, giving credence to new reports that they now number 18,000 fighters.

I met Reyes outside the FARC's main camp, La Sombra, where he drove up in a shiny green Toyota 4-Runner sports utility vehicle, accompanied by a clutch of female bodyguards. A short, bearded man of 48 years, he is rumored to be married to the daughter of the sole surviving founder of the FARC, Manuel Marulanda, 69, whose forte is military strategy. His counterpart in charge of ideology died of a heart attack, but even the FARC's opponents credit Marulanda with creating a formidable, efficient military machine; camp discipline is stern, beginning with 4:00 A.M. reveille, rotating task details, target practice, and classes. Many of the fighters I met were veterans, albeit young, who had left large peasant families where food and money for education is short.

Reyes was blunt and even unapologetic in defending the FARC's tactics. "As a gov-

ernment," he said, "we have the right to collect taxes...and to force those who don't want to pay to do so." He admitted that they levy taxes on every aspect of economic activity in the zones they control, including all facets of the drug business. In return, they protect coca crops, labs, and landing strips. They kidnap those who don't pay voluntarily and target those deemed to have substantial funds, including foreigners. Reyes, who is also in charge of rebel finances, denied government estimates that they take in \$500 million a year, but they certainly rake in tens of millions of dollars. "As long as the war goes on, we will continue to collect taxes," he said, but added that the FARC is willing to help wean peasants off the coca economy as part of a negotiated settlement.

Asking for More

Reyes insists that the FARC is ready to enter serious negotiations with the government, but despite having agreed on an agenda for talks last May, the rebels have made a number of demands that have effectively stalled the process. They want a prisoner exchange to swap 600 captured soldiers and police (although not some 400 civilian hostages held for ransom) for about 400 of their jailed comrades. They are also demanding to be granted "belligerent status" to help their campaign for international recognition, which the government has rejected for fear that it could pave the way for territorial demands.

Colombian president Andrés Pastrana did grant the rebels' request that a Switzerland-size swath of territory in the south be demilitarized as a venue for talks. He wanted to convince the FARC that he was prepared to negotiate seriously, but that move has proved to be a public relations disaster for him. Although the guerrillas have been there for decades, they now openly run the territory and refuse the government's belated attempt to send in an international monitoring team to investigate charges of rebel abuses.

The FARC and the government have agreed, at least in principle, to negotiate a series of political and economic reforms as part of a peace settlement, but the rebels have pocketed every concession they have been given and ask for still more. They demand that the government disband the paramilitary groups in advance of an accord, citing a well-founded fear of annihilation. During an abortive peace attempt a decade ago, they formed a political party, the Union Patriótica, only to see some 3,000 of its candidates and supporters killed. Given the hard line they have adopted, it is not clear what kind of negotiated compromise they would settle for: asked if the Salvadoran accord could be a model, Reyes shook his head no: "We are not looking to disappear, to surrender, the way they did," even though that accord brought peace to El Salvador and reform of its army, economy, and political system. The Salvadoran guerrillas now hold dominant positions in the National Assembly and posts in the new police force, and the death squads are no more.

Still, the FARC has met with a wide spectrum of Colombians, including businessmen, and says it will govern with capitalists; it might prove to be more pragmatic than ideological once seated at the bargaining table. But Reyes is quite clear that he will not compromise at the outset, saying the FARC's goal is power, whether through talks or the battlefield.

Pastrana has staked his presidency on a peace accord, but he does not have much leverage to bring the guerrillas around. The economy is in its worst recession in 70 years, unemployment is at 20 percent, the currency has lost 30 percent of its value, and Colombians are leaving the country in record numbers. He envisions a negotiated settlement that could remedy some of Colombia's worst problems, including a land-tenure pattern in which 10 percent of the population owns 90 percent of the farmland, almost half of which is in the hands of newly rich traffickers. He also thinks he can

strike a grand bargain with the rebels to end coca cultivation and bring alternative economic development to the hinterlands with their help. He may even hope to turn rebel allies on the traffickers themselves.

But aside from the feasibility of such plans, Pastrana clearly does not have U.S. support for such a daring gamble. Key U.S. congressmen want to force him to reassert control over the demilitarized zone, which would surely torpedo the peace process. And the Clinton administration itself refuses to give any aid for coca substitution projects in areas that the guerrillas control; to date it has only given \$5 million for a pilot project in heroin country. It also insists that any peace agreement must permit counternarcotics operations, including forced eradication, to continue, even though Pastrana tried feebly at the outset of his term to argue that aerial fumigation was a counterproductive policy that turned peasants into guerrilla supporters.

The Heart of the Matter

The United States would do well to remember the lessons of Peru next door, where coca cultivation has been dramatically reduced by half through a multipronged policy of coca substitution, improving rural infrastructure, and stiff law enforcement activities, including the shooting down of drug planes, but no fumigation, to avoid creating sympathizers of the Maoist Shining Path insurgency. In contrast, fumigation is the main plank of Colombia's counternarcotics policy; for years chemicals have been sprayed in the Guaviare, Vaupés, and Caquetá provinces, are now being used in the poppy fields of Huila, Cauca, and Valle, and are soon to be used in Putumayo, where peasants protesting eradication paralyzed the government a few years ago. Both sides' actions may simply result in more rain forest being cut down and in cocaine-making and coca-killing chemicals being dumped in the still-virgin provinces of Amazonas, Guainía, and Vichada.

The Clinton administration is giving lip service to the need to pursue an integrated approach to Colombia's problems, but the bulk of its money is still being directed toward the military-backed counternarcotics strategy rather than to economic, judicial, or political programs. U.S. officials have pledged to have no contacts with the FARC until it hands over the guerrillas responsible for killing three American Indian activists earlier this year and accounts for other kidnapped Americans. While understandable, that stance prevents them from appraising or influencing the sincerity of the rebels' interest in negotiating. The main thrust of U.S. policy is a three-year, \$1.5-billion project to train and equip three more Colombian army counternarcotics battalions, provide a dozen Blackhawk helicopters, double the marines' riverine brigade, and complete a joint-services intelligence base located in the heart of guerrilla territory. The FARC has already signaled that it regards this policy as tantamount to a declaration of war, and it will hardly be surprising if these new units and their U.S. trainers become its main targets. Indeed, in November the FARC launched a 1,000-man attack against one of the U.S.-trained units in the remote base of Puerto Inridia.

Faced with an escalation of the war, the FARC may well try to drag the United States in, either to scare it off or to create an anti-Yanqui backlash that it could profit from politically or take advantage of to create opposition to the government. Colombia certainly cannot afford to pursue peace at any cost, but a war-fighting approach alone is likely to lead into a hellish tunnel of decades more of war. The United States has a poor record of sustained high-level attention to foreign trouble spots, let alone of wielding the kind of delicately balanced combination of sticks and carrots that would appear to be the only hope for helping Colombia and its neighbors.

There is great danger in the path that the United States is following in Colombia.

The U.S. government's lack of candor, or at least clarity, about the scope and nature of the problem, and the goals and limits of its strategy, has impeded public debate and the forging of a solid consensus behind U.S. action. The problem is not so much the drug trade as the security threat to Colombia and the region. The U.S. government, unwilling to acknowledge this, is using popular backing for the drug fight to wage a veiled counterinsurgency effort, even though past experience teaches that policies founded on duplicity are bound to fail.

It would be difficult enough to chart a successful policy course given the severity and advanced stage of Colombia's problems. The United States could choose to ignore them, but that course will be increasingly difficult to sustain if the conflict worsens and widens, as seems all but inevitable. Direct threats to significant U.S. interests will require a response sooner or later. Since the ultimate tripwire is Venezuela's oil, the United States could focus on insulating Venezuela and leave Colombia to contend with its turmoil, but this "containment" option is complicated by the Venezuelan government's professed sympathies with the Colombian insurgency.

If the U.S. government continues on its current course of providing massive support to shore up Colombia's government, it must reckon with all the implications. First, it is helping to fashion a 5,000-man Colombian force (and intelligence center) that will be engaging the guerrillas. That puts the United States squarely into the counterinsurgency fight, whether it wants to admit it or not. All U.S. personnel involved, and possibly all U.S. citizens in Colombia, will become targets of the guerrillas, so Washington must be prepared for casualties. Second, the U.S. government must face the fact that this is likely to be a decade-long effort. It must consider how far

it will go if the helicopters it supplies are shot down or captured, or if the size or capabilities of the force prove insufficient. Finally, since the only way out of the conflict is a negotiated solution, it must lend at least as much support to pursuing and achieving that outcome—at the earliest possible date. If Washington does not create opportunities for peace and convince the insurgents of its sincerity, the United States will be drawn into an escalation that could last for many years or be forced to beat an ignominious retreat.

Parallels are bound to be drawn between Colombia today and America's experiences in Vietnam and Central America, many of them no doubt erroneous; but it is at least of cautionary value to recall that the United States could not do what the South Vietnamese political class lacked the will to do. Perhaps the most disheartening aspect of the past year has been the vociferous attacks aimed by Colombian elites against President Pastrana, the first leader to admit the country's dire situation, to speak of the need for major changes, and to make a sincere if naïve overture to the insurgents.

Pastrana realizes that the status quo cannot hold, that the population is desperate for a solution, and that a crisis of governance is in the making. Millions of Colombians have been demonstrating in the streets for an end to their country's orgy of violence, but the political establishment has failed to come together behind a sensible strategy and to recognize that at the heart of the problem is the forcible exclusion of most citizens from the levers of power and economic progress. Former U.S. ambassador to Colombia Myles Frechette attributes this to an unwillingness on the part of the governing class to acknowledge how far things have gotten out of hand. Until that changes, there is little the United States can do to alter the country's continued downward spiral. ●